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AUTHOR(S):

KAMEI, Nobutaka

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AN EDUCATIONAL PROJECT IN THE FOREST: SCHOOLING FOR THE BAKA CHILDREN IN CAMEROON

Nobutaka KAMEI
*Graduate School of Science,
Kyoto University*

ABSTRACT A schooling project started by Catholic missionaries for the children of the Baka, the hunter-gatherers living in the tropical forest, was studied in Cameroon. The content and the effects of the project are described and analyzed with a case of a small school built in a settlement. It is a project specially tailored for the Baka children to incorporate them into the educational system by reducing the barriers for the Baka, a minority group in this area. Some episodes observed in the dry season when the Baka pursue a traditional nomadic lifestyle in the forest were indicative of the severest hurdle for the schooling project.

Key Words: Baka; Hunter-gatherers; School education; Missionary; Minority; Nomadic life.

INTRODUCTION

In discussing school education for the children of hunter-gatherers, it is useful to refer to the recent arguments on the minority education in various societies. For example, the modern educational systems are said to have caused exclusion, segregation, or mandatory assimilation to the majority to the ethnic minorities in nation-states. How to overcome the limitation of the concepts of school education centered on the majority has been debated. Homan (1992) focused on and described separate schools for ethnic minorities established outside of the formal educational systems in Europe. Garcia (1992) advocated inclusive education based on the human rights rather than education that focused on unique minority rights.

Another recent debate is about education to the Deaf children.⁽¹⁾ Cultural movements by the Deaf have asserted their rights to education through sign languages in schools specially for the Deaf (Kimura & Ichida, 1995; Sacks, 1989). Although there exists a trend for the inclusive education promoted by the Salamanca Statement of UNESCO (1994), some activists oppose assimilative education centered on the hearing through oral languages. The pluralism based on the recognition of the diversity of cultures is one of the contemporary main topics in these debates on education for minorities.

Hunter-gatherers are apt to be in a minority status among ethnic groups where the majority is farmers. The discrimination by the neighbors often causes their virtual exclusion from the formal educational system. In order to recognize the actuality of education for the hunter-gatherer children, it is important to keep in

mind this aspect considering the models of pluralism. Also, the existing educational models are ill-suited for the hunter-gatherers because they were constructed for the sedentary minorities in the urban areas of developed countries.

Tshireletso (1998) studied the schooling situation for the San children, the hunter-gatherers in Botswana. He surveyed the San in the sedentary settlement and reported that the school was culturally and linguistically biased for the majority.

OUTLINE OF THE BAKA AND THE METHODS

The Baka is an ethnic group who hunts and gathers in the tropical forests of central Africa. In the Republic of Cameroon, they live in the area of the forest mostly in the East Province. They are regarded as one of so-called "Pygmy" groups. They hunt animals mainly with traps and spears, and gather various kinds of forest products. They also fish in small rivers and streams. Especially in the dry season, it is popular to move to the forest, live in small camps to fish and gather wild resources. These days, most adopted small-scale cultivation, growing plantain bananas, cassavas, and other crops in their own fields. With the introduction of cultivation they have begun to make their own settlements to lead a half-sedentary lifestyle.

Schooling for the Baka children has been introduced these days, but the actual effects have not been reported. In order to help assess the coming changes and prospects for the Baka culture, this research was conducted to clarify and analyze the actuality of the schooling in the forest.

The field for this research is a small Baka settlement, Malapa, in Moloundou Prefecture of the East Province of Cameroon (Fig. 1). The field research was conducted from 18 May 1997 to 7 March 1998.

The population of Malapa is about 60 persons.⁽²⁾ Malapa is a part of a larger village named Nguilili, with a population of about 500 to 600. In the center of Nguilili live people of different ethnic groups including Bangando, Bakuele and Boman, of whom the majorities are farmers. Malapa is situated about 4 km from the center of Nguilili. Near Malapa, there are several other small Baka settlements with a similar population size.

A public school is located in the center of Nguilili. In Malapa, there is another small school specially tailored for the Baka children, established by a missionary project. This school in Malapa was the focal point for this study. Interviews and direct observations were conducted around Malapa. The information on the history and the details of the project and schooling by the missionaries were collected through interviews with associated persons.

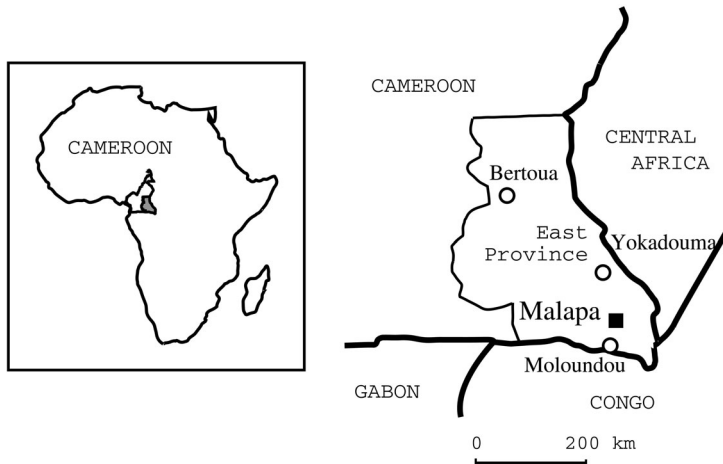


Fig. 1. The study site.

ACTIVITIES OF THE CHILDREN AND SCHOOLING

I. Everyday Life of the Baka Children

The activities of the Baka children are characterized by the lifestyle of hunter-gatherer society. They constantly participate in various hunting and gathering activities. For the boys, fishing is the most important activity, using fishing rods made of forest materials by themselves. Hunting is also important, and they often accompany adult men who go hunting in the forest with spears and a dog. The boys sometimes try to organize a small hunting team among themselves with a dog. But they rarely succeed in such hunting. For girls, fish-bailing in a stream is a popular activity. They form a group to go to the streams in the dry season, in particular, accompanying the adult women. Girls' roles are to help the adults and to look after the babies during fishing. One of the important girls' works is to go to the fields to harvest plantain bananas and other crops to help their mothers.

Both boys and girls play with toys made of forest materials by themselves. Toy traps are the most popular for the boys. Toy spears are used for a play named *leka* in which they shoot rolling papayas on the ground. Small bows and arrows are for hunting of small creatures, such as insects and lizards. Girls like to make small huts where they play. They make small baskets for gathering. They also make and wear similar costumes to those used in the traditional dance of forest spirits. Such culture of toys and plays is deeply rooted in the lifestyle of Baka society in the forest.

II. The Reasons Why the Baka Children Do Not Go to Public Schools

There are public schools for all the children, including the Baka. Most Baka children, however, do not go to school. The reasons for this are summarized as follows:

1. Physical distance:
Baka children do not like travel for school, for all the public schools are built outside the Baka settlements and in the farmer villages.
2. Psychological distance:
The children feel a psychological distance toward the school, because the farmers are apt to despise the Baka.
3. Languages:
The languages of the farmers are used in the public schools, as they are the mother tongues of the teachers and the majority of the pupils. French is also taught as one of the national languages in the East Province. The language of the Baka is not used.
4. Economy:
Often it is difficult for the Baka parents to pay 3000 F CFA per year as school fees of the public school, for the Baka society is not completely monetary.
5. Values:
The Baka people tend to think that the school education is not so important for their life.
6. Nomadic life:
The Baka maintain a nomadic life in the forest at least for a part of the year. During this period, the children are also away from their settlements.

EDUCATIONAL PROJECT: THE CASE OF MALAPA SCHOOL

I. Outline of the Project

A Catholic missionary, "Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes (F.E.C.)," started a project to change the above situation. This project titled, "Projet Pygmées," is specially tailored for the schooling of the Baka children. The F.E.C. is involved in the total plan, responsible for every aspect of the school, such as making the curricula, publishing textbooks, and training teachers. Ten missionaries in the East Province participate in this project, for building and managing schools to make the Baka children study in schools.

All the schools of the project shared some unique characteristics: (1) schools were built near Baka settlements; (2) there were only two grades or classes; (3) curriculum reflected the Baka life.

The "Centre Pré-scolaire de Malapa" was founded around 1992.⁽³⁾ Before this school was built, the Christian faith was propagated to the Baka people in this area, where the Catholic Mission of Moloundou found children who were not going to school. This was the reason why a small school was built for the Baka in Malapa,

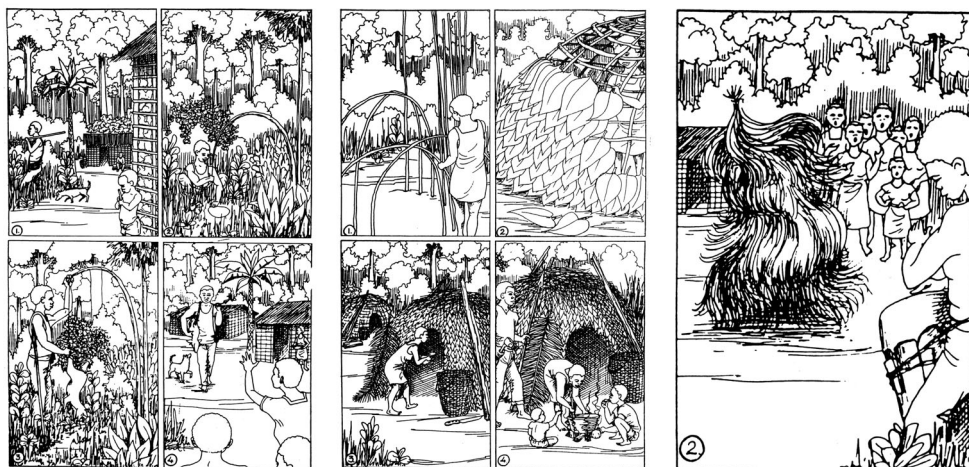


Fig. 2. Hunting with a trap (left); Building a *mongulu*, a traditional hut of the Baka (center); Dance of *jengi*, a traditional spirit in the forest (right). From the textbook of ORA LECTURE 1 (Frère Antoine J., 1993).

to serve not only for the Malapa children, but all the children of the Baka living nearby.

The two classes are called “ORA 1” and “ORA 2”⁽⁴⁾, for the first and the second grades. When the children graduate ORA 2, they are expected to be admitted to the second grade of the public school in the center of Nguilili. The two grades of the Malapa school correspond to the first grade of the public school. The system serves as an intermediary between the public school and the Baka society for young children.

The parents pay 500 F CFA per year for school fees, which is much cheaper than the public school. When it is difficult for the parents to pay, the missionary allows them to donate produce and meat, such as plantain bananas and chickens instead.

In ORA 1, the teacher uses the Baka language. It represents the effort to make the Baka children feel familiar with the school. In ORA 2, French is used as the main language.

The missionary attempts to recruit Baka persons as teachers. Training of the Baka teachers also comprises an important part of this project. In Malapa, the school has two teachers, a Baka man and a Boman man from an ethnic group of farmers nearby. The Baka teacher serves as the schoolmaster.

The textbooks are edited and published by the F.E.C. Reading, writing and arithmetic comprise the subjects.⁽⁵⁾ Although each subject has three levels from ORA 1 to ORA 3, in Malapa, textbooks of ORA 1 and ORA 2 are used for the lessons. In these textbooks, one finds the efforts to understand the Baka culture. In the textbook, *Lecture ORA 1*, there is a series of illustration depicting hunting with a trap (Fig. 2, left): (1) A man leaving his settlement for the forest, (2) making a trap, (3) trapping an animal, and (4) returning home with the game. These are

familiar scenes for the Baka children. Another series of illustration depicts the process of building the traditional hut, *mongulu* (Fig. 2, center), showing step by step how the Baka women actually build their huts. There is even a depiction of *jengi*, one of the most important spirits of the Baka (Fig. 2, right). Considering the spiritual significance of *jengi* to the Baka, the Catholic missionary must be lauded for their audacity to use it in school material.

In the lessons, the teachers make efforts to attract children's attention. A lesson had a scene involving a toy trap. The teacher ordered a Baka boy to make a trap usually made by the boys. As made one in the schoolyard, all the students observed the process, which the teacher explained in both the Baka and French languages. These efforts help reduce the psychological distance the children may feel toward the school.

II. Schooling in the Rainy Season

1. *The number of pupils*

Of the 66 children who at least once attended the Malapa school, 48 were in ORA 1 and 18 were in ORA 2.⁽⁶⁾ Of these children, 48 were Baka and the remaining 18 were children of other ethnic groups, some of whom with Baka mothers married to other ethnic farmers.

2. *Attendance*

While the teachers made efforts to have children attend school at the beginning of each school year in September, they were not always successful. In September 1997, I surveyed attendance of the children of Malapa and the center of Makpumbulu, a settlement of the Baka about 500 m away from the school. Of the 22 children, 10 went to Malapa school, 3 had graduated and attended the public school in the center of Nguilili, whereas the remaining 9 did not go to school at all.

Of the 9 children who did not go to school, 4 were 6 and 7 year-old, in fact, preschoolers. The remaining 5 children, from 10 to 13 years of age, refused to go to school.

3. *The reasons to go or not to school*

While some parents often tell their children to go to school, the reason has never been explained to me. Their motivation to make their children go to school is not based on firm judgment. When the children go fishing or farming with adults instead of going to school, their parents do not persuade them to go to school at all. One strong motivation to go to school for the children themselves is to see friends.

About the children who do not go to school, the parents explain, for example: "There are no clothes to wear," or "There is no money." These explications suggest that the economical issue is still one of the barriers. It also implies that the parents do not value school education so much. If a child does not go to school, his brothers and sisters tend to stay home together. Absenteeism may be influenced by the parents.

4. *Promotion*

After finishing ORA 2, the Baka children are expected to continue to public school in the center of Nguilili. In the 1997 - 1998 school year, there were 16 children in ORA 2, of whom 11 proceeded to public school and 4 remained in ORA 2. It is not rare for the children to repeat a year, hence the majority of the pupils spend more than two years finishing the preparatory course at Malapa.

EPISODES IN THE DRY SEASON

The Baka customarily lead a nomadic life in the dry season. They move from their settlements to the forest with their household goods, make small camps of traditional huts made of leaves and branches, and live there during this season in order to fish, hunt and gather wild resources of the forest. Naturally the children follow their parents and relatives to the forest camps far away from school. It is a big problem for the school teachers.

I will describe here two episodes in the dry season for better understanding of the conflict between the Baka culture and the schooling system.

I. An Experiment: A Dormitory Project

A Boman teacher of the Malapa school was eager to make the pupils come to school even during the nomadic season in the forest, because once children go into the forest with their parents, they are apt to quit school. When the dry season arrived in the end of January 1998, he thought of a dormitory for the children to sleep and eat during the period when their parents were absent from the settlements. He proceeded to build a *mongulu* (See Fig. 2, center), and finally built five *mongulu* huts in the schoolyard with the help of the Baka pupils' parents. The simple dormitory was started, with at least one of the two teachers and their wives on hand to take care of the children. The missionary managing this school supported this project as an experiment against absenteeism during the dry season. The children were allowed to take and eat plantain bananas in the field tended by the missionary. The missionary also provided them with rice and other foods from time to time for encouragement.

Of the number of the people who stayed in the dormitory (Fig. 3), the maximum was 21. There were always non-Malapa pupils who stayed, including Malapa adults and the pupils of other public schools.

When this project started, children were attracted to the dormitory life because it seemed a fun idea. Lots of children came to stay with their classmates, even when their parents were not away. But when the parents started to move into the forest, the children naturally followed them and disappeared from the dormitory. In the end, this dormitory became inhabited by only young adult men of Malapa. When almost of the Malapa people moved to the forest, it became uninhabited. This dormitory project failed.

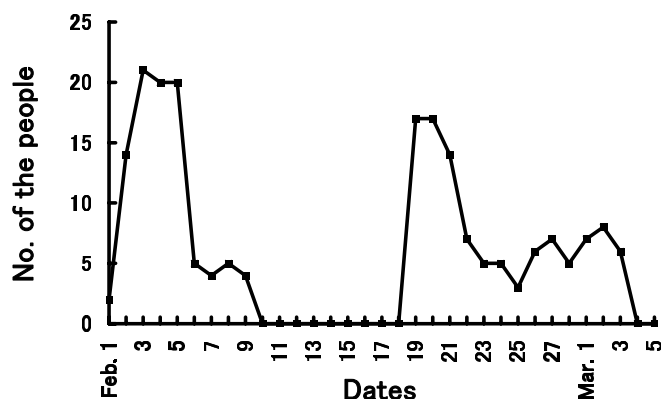


Fig. 3. Number of the people in the school dormitory.

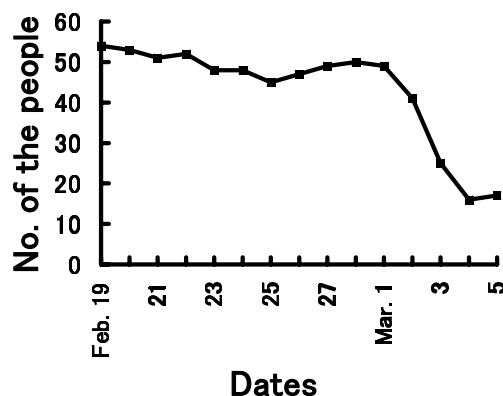


Fig. 4. Number of the people present in Malapa settlement.

II. A Compromise: the Dry Season Vacation

In the beginning of March, many people left the settlement especially in a few days (Fig. 4). The number of the people staying in Malapa on 5 March was reduced to 17, of which 10 were pupils, and 5 were their parents or siblings who remained to take care of the pupils. Without school, everybody would have left Malapa.

The number of the children in Malapa school from 19 February to 6 March is shown in Fig. 5, where the Baka and other ethnic groups are shown separately. There is a sudden decrease of Baka pupils, in contrast to other children.

Of the 33 pupils in Malapa, Makpumbulu and Ngoli areas, as many as 19 were absent on 6 March, of which 14 had left for the forest.

The Boman teacher, who tried the dormitory project, insisted on visiting the forest camps to persuade the children to return to the school. But a French sister

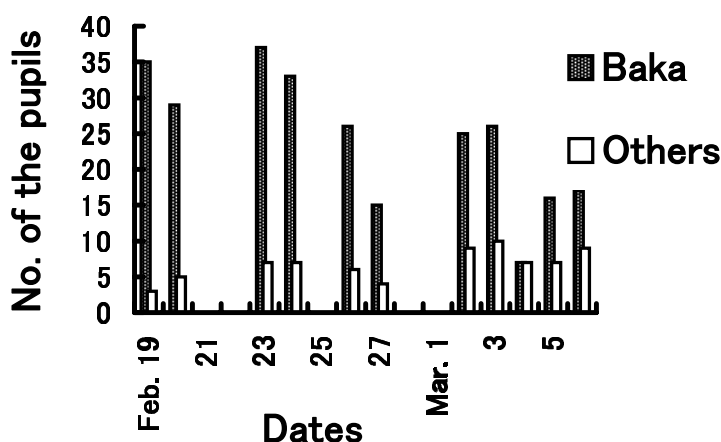


Fig. 5. Number of the pupils present at Malapa school.

of the missionary, responsible for the school management, came to observe the situation, and decided to close this school until the children came back in the end of the dry season. She emphasized the importance of conforming education to the Baka culture. “The dry season vacation” for the Baka children started in 1998 as a result of a compromise between the schooling system and the Baka lifestyle.

DISCUSSION

I have suggested six reasons why Baka children may become absent from school: (1) physical distance, (2) psychological distance, (3) language, (4) economy, (5) values, and (6) nomadic life.

The reasons (1), (2) and (3) are mainly related with the minority status in the area. The Baka children used to be virtually excluded from the formal educational system. The Catholic missionaries aimed to solve this situation without forceful assimilation. By building schools in Baka settlements, where the majority is the Baka, the physical and the psychological distance for the Baka children was reduced. Using textbooks with illustrations of forest spirits and hunting-gathering activities upheld their culture. The use of the Baka language at least in ORA 1, also removed barriers for the Baka children in entering into the schooling system, and served as an intermediary between the minority status and the formal educational system. The project has been successful up to a point. The ideas of inclusive education and pluralism can be found in this experimental project.

On the other hand, reasons (4), (5) and (6) why Baka children may not go to school is more deeply related with their lifestyle as hunter-gatherers, and harder to resolve. Parents still state economic difficulty to explain why the child may not go to school. They have values in which they prefer hunting-gathering activities

to school. The school had to devise a special vacation period for the Baka children in the dry season.

As the forest life comprises the major component of Baka culture, no schooling is possible without affecting and being affected by it. The prospects for education in the Baka society in the future will not be known without continued observation of the interaction between the forest life and the modern schooling system. It is important to debate this issue not only with the aspect of minority education but also with the aspect of the culture of hunter-gatherers in the forest.

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NOTES

- (1) In the context of the Deaf culture movements, they prefer the expression "Deaf" to "deaf" in order to emphasize the aspect of the linguistic and cultural minority like ethnic minorities with their proper names.
- (2) It is difficult to show exact population of Malapa, because flexibility of the membership is extremely high.
- (3) The name of the school was changed to "Centre d'Education de Base de Malapa" in 1997.
- (4) "ORA" stands for "Observer, Réfléchir, Agir (to observe, to reflect, to act)," which is the title of the textbooks used in the project. The curriculum is named, "la méthode ORA (the ORA method)."
- (5) The textbooks are titled, "Lecture," "Ecriture," and "Calcul," in French.
- (6) It is difficult to know the exact number of registered pupils, because the teachers often change the names in the list as occasion demands, for example, when the children drop out or leave the settlements. The data shown here were obtained from direct observations every morning during the research period.

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Author's Name and Address: Nobutaka KAMEI, *Laboratory of Human Evolution Studies, Faculty of Science, Kyoto University, 606-8502, JAPAN. E-Mail: zeami@jinrui.zool.kyoto-u.ac.jp*